TOWN OF HILLSBOROUGH

Swarm Season: Help Honeybees Find a New Home

April and May are prime swarm season for honeybees. Do you know what to do if you spot a swarm?

Calling an exterminator should not be on your list. Instead, immediately contact a local beekeeper or the Orange County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension to help protect these bees, which are responsible for a third of the food we eat.

Bees need our help

Honeybee numbers are declining due to diseases, parasites, pesticides and malnutrition. Following World War II, about 4.5 million commercial hives were in the United States. About 2 million exist today. Of managed colonies, about 44 percent survive on average each year. Feral colonies survive at even lower rates.

Unprotected by their hive, a bee swarm is exposed to rain, cold, and myriad predators. A swarm generally cannot survive more than three days. By immediately contacting a beekeeper about a swarm, you improve the chance for rescuing these swarming bees before they change locations.

The Cooperative Extension maintains a call list of beekeepers willing to catch swarms, especially since buying a starting hive costs about $150. A national directory of swarm catchers is available at www.honeybeeswarmremoval.com.

No sting to worry about

With no hive to defend, swarming bees are much less defensive. Their focus is on protecting the queen at the center of the swarm, as she is responsible for their continued existence.

A swarm of honeybees, like this one in a plum tree, is a colony of bees searching for a new home.

Need a swarm catcher?

Contact:

Orange County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension

- 919-245-2050

Hillsborough Public Space Manager Stephanie Trueblood

- 919-296-9481
- stephanie.trueblood@hillsboroughnc.gov

To prepare for the journey to a new home, worker bees leaving the hive fill their honey stomachs. Gorged on honey, they are almost incapable of stinging due their distended abdomens.

Swarm Behavior 101

Honeybees must live as colonies since a single honeybee cannot survive alone. They have a complex society in which members perform services, such as gathering food, providing health care, heating and cooling the

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hive, and nursing babies.

Bees swarm to split the colony in half. The queen leaves with the departing half, and a new colony emerges in the old home.

To prepare for swarming, nurse bees create new queen cells, one of which will lead the new colony. As worker bees fill their stomachs to transport honey to a new home, the departing queen's court withholds food from her for a few days to make her flight-weight. The only other time she has flown is as a new queen for mating.

Honeybees create wax comb to store pollen, nectar or brood.

Scout bees busily fly throughout the day in a range of about three miles to identify prospective homes. They report back to the swarm by waggle dancing in a figure eight. The more intensely they dance, the better the chances that their prospect is dry, protected from predators and large enough to house the colony's food and babies. If you see a swarm, look for multiple waggle dancers on the surface.

If a bee has found a better prospect, a scout will investigate and report back with her own waggle dance. When the scouts reach consensus, the swarm takes flight to its new home, usually in a hollow tree. The bees will build comb from their wax glands to store pollen, nectar or brood in their new home.

Bee City USA

The Town of Hillsborough is a designated Bee City. As such, it works to help raise awareness of the role pollinators play in sustaining more than 75 percent of the world's plant species and to help expand pollinator -friendly practices and environments in town.

The Hillsborough Garden Club works in partnership with the Town of Hillsborough — through the Public Space Division and Tree Board — on developing the Bee City program and educational materials.

For more information on pollinator-friendly activities and upcoming events:

- See the town's Bee City USA webpage.
- Contact Hillsborough Public Space Manager Stephanie Trueblood at 919-296-9481 or stephanie.trueblood@hillsboroughnc.gov.